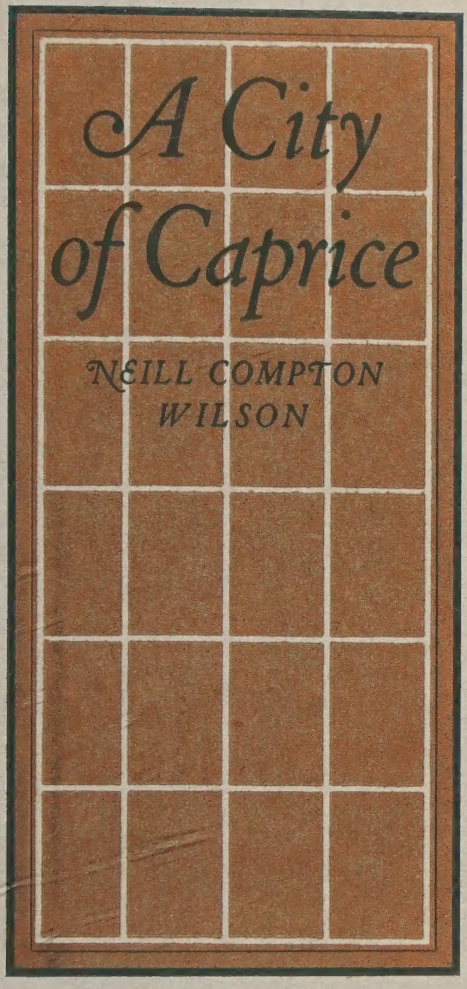

A City
of Caprice
NEILL COMPTON
WILSON

2C185
RARE
~~2200~~
18.50

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/cityofcaprice0000neil

A CITY OF CAPRICE

To E. K. W.

Acknowledgment is hereby made to Prof. Albert Stanburrough Cook, founder of the Yale University annual prize for poetry, for the republication of "The Legend of Tamalpais," the 1911 Yale poem.

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"Like as not
He broods of plot and counterplot."

A CITY OF CAPRICE

BY

NEILL COMPTON WILSON

SAN FRANCISCO
THE METROPOLITAN PRESS

Second Edition, Revised

COPYRIGHT 1921, BY NEILL COMPTON WILSON

CONTENTS

San Francisco - - - - - - - - - 13
With Fremont - - - - - - - - - 14
Old Chinatown - - - - - - - - - 17
The New Chinatown - - - - - - - 19
Market and Kearny - - - - - - - - 20
Fisherman's Wharf - - - - - - - 23
Street of the Adventurers - - - - - - - 25
The Fog - - - - - - - - - 26
Bush Street - - - - - - - - - 28
Geary Street - - - - - - - - - 29
In Sanguinetti's - - - - - - - - 30
Mission Dolores - - - - - - - - 33
The Kiss - - - - - - - - - - 34
Telegraph Hill - - - - - - - - 39
Powell Street - - - - - - - - - 40
My Friend Rosner - - - - - - - 42
Mardi Gras - - - - - - - - - 44
"S. S. China, San Francisco" - - - - - - 46
Land's End - - - - - - - - - 47
Macondray Street - - - - - - - - 48
Three Finger Jack - - - - - - - - 49
The Tivoli - - - - - - - - - 50
When Sally Danced - - - - - - - - 52
Lotta's Fountain - - - - - - - - 57
The Farallone Isles - - - - - - - - 59
Picture Brides - - - - - - - - 60
The Magic Carpet - - - - - - - - 63
The Legend of Tamalpais - - - - - - 65
Grant Avenue - - - - - - - - - 69
The Trade Wind - - - - - - - - 70
Barbary Coast - - - - - - - - - 73
Mason Street - - - - - - - - 75
The Last Night - - - - - - - - - 77
In Passing - - - - - - - - - 79
The Lights - - - - - - - - - 80

Can, within a mirror, live
Scenes already fugitive?
Can, in oils and canvas, thus
Cling a sunset luminous?
Or, though sweet the corsage, yet
Flourish, plucked, a violet?
Then, oh city of caprice,
Shall I capture you with these!

A CITY OF CAPRICE

SAN FRANCISCO

I sometimes wonder if, in days
  When Rome and Thebes were young,
When Athens ruled her epic sea
  And all its isles among,
When glory flung her torch in turn
  Unto each city-state,
You too, would not have caught at it,
  And men have called you great.

At times I wonder whether you
  Are really of today,
Or of another substance, dim
  Transmuted from decay:
A substance that has outstripped leagues
  And leaped antiquity
To dwell anew, in lesser state,
  Beside a younger sea.

Or if, indeed, your stones reveal
  A modern chiseling,
I wonder whence your attributes
  Of mood and manner spring.
I wonder at your storied hills,
  Your genius thousand-proved;
But not at this: that you are held
  Remarkably beloved.

WITH FREMONT

Over the hills but lately Spain,
Swearing and singing at the miles,
Lashed we through grasses stirrup-high,
Riding with Fremont; through defiles
Up to a crest, and there drew rein.

Far at our feet they fell away:
Circled with hills, a silent Bay
Blue in the sun, and a set of isles.

Over us laughed a winter sky
Splotched with the lengthened afternoon.
West, to the sea, a strip of gray
Wound between headlands. Gilt were they;
Into that poppied cleft were soon
Sinking the sun; nor light nor bell
Noted the requiem of day.
Empty of sound, of life, of smoke,
Full at our feet the harbor lay.

Fremont, his broad hat off, first spoke.
"Let us push on," he said, " 'tis late,
Yonder, indeed, is a golden gate."

Though, as we turned, I thought there broke
Gleaming a City. Dream or spell,
Fair stood it forth; its walls and spires
Flashed, and were gone; and headlands glowed
Only with poppy-kindled fires.

So, with a touch of spur, we rode
Down the long slopes while sunset fell.

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"I wonder at your storied hills."

OLD CHINATOWN

In times gone by, this quarter was
A haunt of screaming orchestras,
Of baleful odors, sights and dins
That shocked the seven deadly sins,
And drew its subjects, miles around,
By nightly suction underground.

'Twas here that gongs Confucian struck,
That fan tan, pie gow, chuck-a-luck,
And all the gods of change and chance
Exacted silver, paid romance,
And bade their losers, on the shelves,
In poppy dreams release themselves.

And here, where creaking stairways led
To dens exotic overhead,
Adventure's handmaids peeped and sighed.
Here every opened door implied
New labyrinths, whose stenches leagued
To hold the portal, yet intrigued.

Dismantled outpost of Cathay!
Already dim in yesterday
The embers of your joss sticks burn.
The hands of Old St. Mary's turn
But forward, and her nearby chime
Has well intoned the flight of time.

And so we wander streets, where blent
The colors of the Orient,
And find them swiftly fading out.
Another raiment is about,
A picturesqueness that is dressed
In frank perception of the West.

And yet, in yonder doorway, sits
An unregenerate, who fits
The vanished picture. Like as not
He broods of plot and counterplot,
And still through dreams avenging struts.
But here he peddles lichi nuts.

THE NEW CHINATOWN

So Chinatown is changed. Its smells,
Its rabbit warrens, gambling hells,
Its gorgeous sins that nightly woke
To sleep again through poppy smoke—
All these, with values weightier,
Went ashen with the Things That Were.

Yet pause: if lurid order fades,
A pastel subtler now pervades.
The ancient oracles recede,
But youth resurgent leaps to lead;
And in the merry compromise
Of high school English, laughing eyes,—

Of silk and broidered trousers, worn
By adepts to the manner born,
Of raven tresses, quaintly done,
Yet foreheads friendly to the sun,
We find a picturesqueness far
More deft, attesting Things That Are.

And somehow, when the lanterns sway
Above the haunts of yesterday,
The new charm grows. The old soil stirs;
And we, the privileged trespassers,
Behold, through forty centuries,
Such flowers thrusting through as these.

MARKET AND KEARNY

Violet', lady? Thees-a ones,
Fresh-a so and merry,
Only ten-a cent' the bunch.
Jonquil? Huckleberry?
Sweet acacia? Almond bloss',
Firs' of February?

Orchid', miss? Or what you call
Don'-forget-a-me's?
Fifteen cent'! Ah, take the bunch,
Such a handful these!
I will not forget-a you;
Come tomorra, please!

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

."Must witness with the creaking gulls.
The landing of the catch."

FISHERMEN'S WHARF

If I were eloquent of brush,
Or plucked a potent lyre,
I'd choose that hour whose molten flush
Descends from prospects higher,—
That hour of hush and eloquence,
And water-mirrored fire.

I'd lay the crimson of the tide
To canvas, and await
The homing of the fishing fleet
A-down the narrow strait,—
Those bobbing spots of silhouette
Against the Golden Gate.

I'd mingle pigments till the dusk,
And loiter till the bar
Released its last reluctant craft,
Belated and afar,
Whose solitary lantern pricked
The distance like a star.

And then in frets Sicilian
And gamuts Genoese
I'd strum: to lads in worsted caps,
And tunics to their knees,
Who race along, with shout and song,
And plunder of the seas.

But I, with gift of neither brush
Nor zither, to attach
The picturesque to canvas, nor
The pensive chord to snatch,
Must witness with the creaking gulls
The landing of the catch.

STREET OF THE ADVENTURERS

Here, tradition still avers,
Loiter the adventurers,
Waiting call to high emprise
Off where buried treasure lies.
Flotsam of the seven seas,
Combers of the beaches these,
Blown from every coco-isle,
    Bide they here awhile;
Bide they till some pinnace shoves
Off for further treasure-troves.

Once the captain of them all
Tarried by this plaza wall,
Pondering, with dreaming eyes,
    Sea-borne enterprise;
One who now forever dwells
In the murmur of his swells,
Port attained, adventure won—
Dreamy, restless Stevenson.

But the others—who are they,
Into twilight sailed away,
Into purple mist, that thus
Mantles the adventurous?
Years agone and years anew
Ships this grim, persistent crew;
Winds agone and winds to be
    Blow them far to sea.
Yet the winds, returning, greet
Ever these in Kearny Street.

I was with Drake.
While his corvette tarried
Grim in the wake
Of a Spain long harried,
Closed I the Break
To the crew he carried.
(Closed I the Break
In the coast, and parried
Skillfully Drake.)

Held I the Breach,
Though the trade winds, blowing,
Oft would beseech,
Or a sail unknowing
Pass within reach
Where were wild flowers growing.
(Dunes of the beach
And my poppies blowing,
Held we the Breach.)

Age-long adrift
Where the Bay tides nestle,
Naught but the thrift
Or a Tamal's pestle
Heard I, when swift
Chanced Ayala's vessel.
(Scarce did I lift,
Yet his tiny vessel
Plunged through the Rift.)

Followed then flocks
Of a padre's tending;
Lo, then an ox
From the far plains wending:
Cities sprang, docks
And a noise unending.
(Ah, for the flocks
And the hills extending;
Miss I the flocks.)

I was astir
When the Rio, routed,
Sank in the blur
Of the gate she flouted.
Reckless it were
That my Gate be doubted.
(Who recalls her?
Like my poppies, routed,
Lost in the blur?)

Though, when the shrift
Of these stones is over,
When the white drift
Of the sands yields cover,
Still shall I sift
Through the hills, and hover.
(Still shall I drift,
Till my poppies cover
Bright, where I lift.)

BUSH STREET

Millicent her lattice flung
To the day's advance,
And the morning mirrored hung
In her radiance.
Soon adorable she looked
As the gods could wish,
While a trifling breakfast cooked
In its chafing dish.

Millicent the flowers arranged,
Put the dishes back,
Had the goldfish water changed,
Touched the bric-a-brac,
Ordered something from the store,
There! The day's complete—
What a gorgeous morning for
Doing Geary Street!

GEARY STREET

Millicent in foxes' fur,
Millicent and muff,
(They were but a part of her
For 'twas mild enough),—
Millicent, from clever head
Trim to stylish feet,
Window-shopped and visited,
Doing Geary Street.

Millicent, approving, passed
Millicents galore,
Each as different from the last
As the buds she wore;
Each unlike, to all intents,
As a rose from rose.
Fragrant lane of Millicents,
What a garden blows!

IN SANGUINETTI'S

You acquaint' my good frien' Steve,
Others quick forget?
One time all acquaint' with him,
Steve-a Sanguinett'.

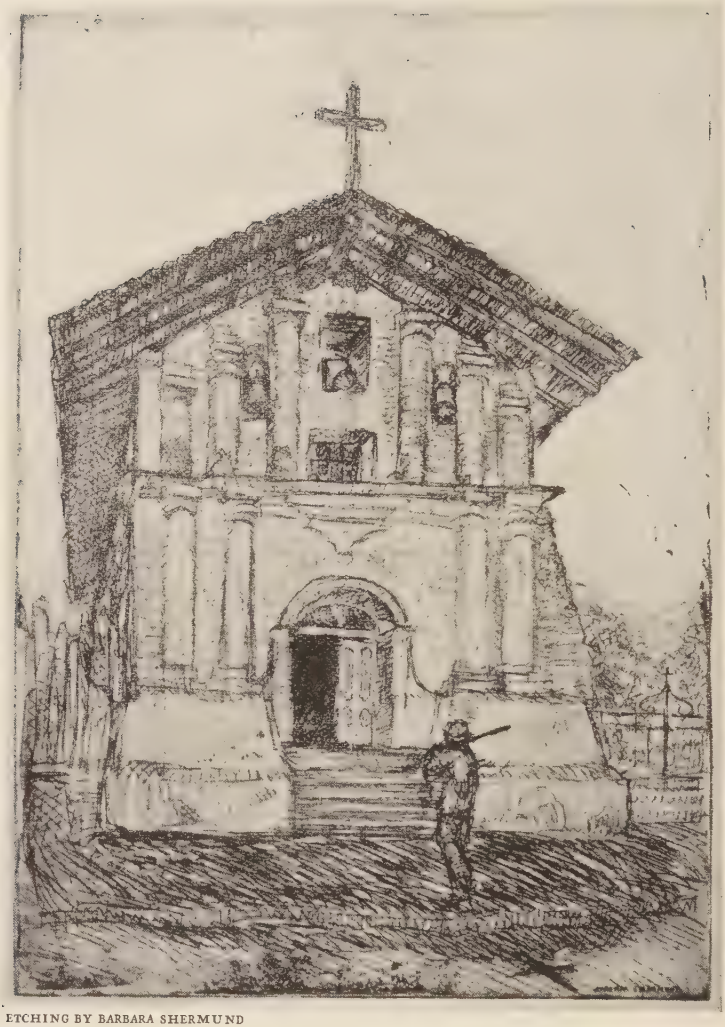
You remember his-a place,
Always wide the door?
Poet', artis', come to it
Twenty years or more.

Always gay the glasses clink',
Always glad the shout;
Then the Fire come pouff! along,
Steve-a get burnt out.

Ah, the vin in cellar pop,
Ah, the burn' spaghett'!
Poet', artis', seldom come
Back to Sanguinett'.

Steve-a die the other day,
Host-a glad no more.
Cafe broke; the sheriff put
Placard on the door.

Broke his big-a heart, I think,
Frien's so soon forget.
Good-a bye! Good bye, good luck,
Steve-a Sanguinett'!



ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"Ay, a crone's Dolores now."

MISSION DOLORES

Here's a garden. Some declare
Once Dolores wore it, fair
As a blossom for the hair.

Passers-by may well forget
Locks of hers were ever jet.
But the flower is blooming yet.

Long have slept, beneath the bough,
All her brothers in the vow.
Ay, a crone's Dolores now.

Daily at her litanies
Sobs she, slipping to her knees,
"Padre! All my children, these?"

Then, her brief devotions done,
Sits and drowses in the sun.
What's a crone to anyone?

All right, I killed him. Well, and who's to fret?
A girl can't swing for tryin' suicide!
I tell you that he fought me for the thing,
Just fought me for it. Nice place this, to bring
A girl to, ain't it? Gimme a cigarette.
You say you write police news? Say, you've got
A pull here, haven't you, some drag inside
To get a girl some coke? My nerves is shot;
I haven't slept a minute since he died,
Right in my arms. Ah, why keep questioning
A girl for stuff she's tryin' to forget?
All right, I'll spill the story; though I'll bet
That jailer's ugly ear is at the door.

I loved him. That's the truth, as God's my store.
I loved him as a woman loves, who'd fling
Her soul to hell, with life and body, for
One hour of happiness.

All right, I'll swing.
I tell you that I loved him. That is, till
I watched him and this other girl go by,
Out on the dance floor there; an' passin', I
Heard what he said. Then sounds an' things went still,
Somethin' just seemed to snap. I don't know what,
Somethin' just seemed to snap.

Ah, why do you
Try to ask questions? Ain't my nerves been shot?
All I know is, it seemed the lights went out.

I went on dancin', yes; or moved about
In twilight, sort o'; but for me, I knew
The dance was over, and the music through.

I got it. In a capsule. Never mind
Askin' me how—just take it as you find:
I got it.

Then, although I'd had my hour,
Knowin', for me, the honey all was sipped,
The summer gone, an' me the wilted flower,
I couldn't do it. God, if only I'd
Swallowed that little capsule when I tried!
I couldn't die! I just, just couldn't die!

Then he came whistlin' past. The floor was bare,
Someone was settin' chairs an' sweepin' out.
"Mollie", he murmured when he seen me there,
"Mollie!" he cried, "What's all the row about?"

I couldn't answer. Hadn't I just tried
To die?

An' then I felt his sleeve, his coat
Pressin' me close. "Kid, give us just a kiss,
Just one, one kiss," he whispered. And I tried,
Fightin', to shove him off. But then he lied,
Lied with his lips about this girl o' his.
And I? You wonder at the woman of it?
When I turned up my face to his, I'd slipped

The capsule to my tongue. If dreams could quit!
A second more, he'd kissed me. "Kid, I love it,
Honest, Kid—". An' then his eyes grew wide;
"The sugar on your lips—". He caught his throat,
Staggered, and sank. I guess you gather it;
The sugar on my lips was cyanide.

An' I? Well, ain't I here?

I thought you spoke.
Faugh, what a cigarette! I can't taste smoke.
The coke! Oh, God, kid, get it quick! The coke!

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"Ah, moon that is Naples, swim ever, yet spill
Some bit of effulgence for Telegraph Hill!"

TELEGRAPH HILL

Sure, Mother Machree was your mother, Wild Rose,
Mavourneen so temptin' and darin'.
A sun of the West may be dryin' the clothes,
But the mist in your eye is of Erin.
The toss of your head is a manner as old,
Though for it, colleen, we adore you,
As any that ever your sister Isolde
Fetched Tristan the centuries before you.
Oh mists that are Erin, blow, blow for her still
That lives at the bottom of Telegraph Hill!

Now donna é mobile! Eyes that were blue
Still laugh, still allure, but turn deeper;
And color on browner cheeks heightens anew
As Telegraph Hill becomes steeper;
As streets become swarming, till life were a war
Of trouble and toil and begetting.
Ah, Tosca! Fair Gilda! Nay, sweet Lammermoor,
In what a gregarious setting!
Ah, moon that is Naples, swim ever, yet spill
Some bit of effulgence for Telegraph Hill!

Swift tumble the slopes, till in soil of today
A seed of the past is transplanted.
From under the lanterns of younger Cathay
One peeps, her cheeks olive, eyes slanted,
Hands wistfully thrust into sleeve, to perview
The trend of the times through her lashes,
Where West becomes East and the old becomes new,
And most of it rattles and crashes.
—A bit of old Canton, dare, dream as she will,
Abroad in the shadow of Telegraph Hill.

POWELL STREET

A lane there is, when daylight dies,
Of piquant lips and laughing eyes;

A lane that calls the season's bloom
Beside her curb in quaint perfume;

That all unheralded, unsung,
Grows nightly old, yet ever young.

This Street of Youth is short, at best;
Three blocks, then alters interest.

Her shops are small; she scarce invites
With window-shows or blaze of lights.

Yet, brief of span or short of bards,
She breathes of Old World boulevards,

And, eight to twelve, attains delight
In breaking petals of the night.

Scant Street of Youth! What frail romance
In coquetry, in passing glance—

In swing of ankle, curve of cheek,
And lashes half inclined to speak,

Here proffer folly, venture charm
To snatch a moment arm-in-arm!

From eight to twelve: so swiftly fade
The hues along this promenade.

Then stars turn chill, then lights grow brusque
To this rialto of the dusk.

The play is spent, the night soon old,
The cafes out, the flowers sold,

The taxis gone, the sidewalks bare
From Eddy Street to Union Square.

Yet is there one you seek to meet?
Then come tonight to Powell Street.

MY FRIEND ROSNER

My friend Rosner says that songs,
Though of fashion fleeting,
Ne'er lose charm, where charm belongs,
By repeating;
Though, for thirty years or so,
He has heard them come and go.

Rosner says that never jest,
In the least deserving,
Dulls for him in interest
By preserving:
Gentle leader, past whose head
Shafts these thirty years have sped.

Rosner! Were the stars all known,
Lucent and subsided,
Whom your raised baton alone
Safe has guided
From horizon to the heights,
What a host of gleam-by-nights!

Does a jester fail to score?
Rosner's head, instanter,
Rears its arid summit, for
Him to banter.
Does a prima donna flat?
Rosner's fiddles bolster that.
Does a tumbler overreach?
Swift his trombones to the breach!
Snaps a virtuoso's string?
Throbs his organ, succoring . . . . .

Then, one night, the Orpheum
Found his organ closed and dumb.

Dumb? Perhaps. But somehow grief
    Limns another vision,
And he's but stepped down, this brief
    Intermission—
He, perpetuate for whom
Jests their flavor, songs their bloom.

Maybe, when the lights are low,
    Actor-shadows linger
In the wings, where grins Pierrot,
    Pointing finger,
And the stars of other days
Sing their songs as Rosner plays.

MARDI GRAS

Mardi Gras! While sweep the strings,
History in pageant springs
From her crowded pages
With the sunset's colorings
And the lore of ages.
Reign, anacronism; call,
Motley, to the brilliant hall!

Bandit of the coach express,
Gambler of the Fifties,—yes,
Somber Vigilante,
Greet, and ancient differences
Purge in red Chianti.
Ho, Don Gasper, dip with bliss
Your Castilian beard in this!

Monk, whose lips communion bold
With Senora's covet, hold!
Saintlier and moister
Were this purple vintage, old
As a Mission cloister.
Pour, yet pour; for good and all
Soon 'twill be apocryphal.

Throb then, 'cellos, summon drums:
Caballero, haste! nor strums
Cadence thus manana.
Nay, too late! The Gringo comes,
Cowman in bandana,
Sweeping seven-gallon hat
To the Girl of Poker Flat.

Senorita, breathless flirt,
Close your fan and gather skirt.
Hither strides a miner,
By his boots and colored shirt
Clearly Forty-niner.
Come! from pages of romance
Step, and show how Spain could dance.

—So, in pageantry expressed,
Splash the colors of the West
In a merry blending.
Though, with final vintage pressed,
Were it, think you, ending?
Past and done the Things that Are,
With mantilla and guitar?

"S. S. CHINA, SAN FRANCISCO"

(One hundred and sixty voyages
across the Pacific and return)

When last the watch, when burn the side-lights dim,
Past seven bells, no "scrapped for copper" she.
A better port she'll seek on some far rim.

And as toward first Alohas, full and free,
Toward leis of greeting, lines still true and trim
And masts aslant, she'll settle to the sea.

Then wind and sun will scour her empty lane,
The gulls will search the swells she used to dip.
Ay, parting leis will wait for her in vain.

So into port, eight bells unstruck, she'll slip.
And those who know the docks, nor find again
Her like, will mutter: "Ay. There went a ship."

LAND'S END

I watch the skirts of evening catch
The molten flame of Pele,
And almost hear a wind-borne snatch
Of mid-Pacific tarepatch,
Or throb of ukulele.

I watch the staunch old "China", link
With isles Kamehamehan,
To westward wing, and on the brink
Of sunset pause, then hull down sink
In lava Kilauean.

I wonder if, when time began,
In fluid days and olden,
Some bridge was not designed to span
This shore to isles Oahuan,
Those coral coasts to golden.

So kindred are they, each to each,
The very tide that ferries
This idle flotsam out of reach,
Returning, casts upon the beach
These wild ohelo berries.

MACONDRAY STREET

Clematis and ivy keep
    Tryst precarious and slipping,
Where a flight of stairs leads steep
    Up to breezes whipping.
There Macondray Street hangs quaint,
Flowers bloom, and painters paint.

What if neighbor mansions reach
    All the sun, nor mumble pardon?
Still Macondray's dwellings, each
    In its tiny garden,
Making tubs and boxes do,
Perch on air, and view the view.

Overlord of waters spread,
    Islands strewn and vessels sailing,
Watching tides at dusk grow red,
    Watching sunsets paling,
High above the waves that beat,
Silent clings Macondray Street.

So, with glimpse of vistas salt,
    Gardens fresh, and boxes blooming,
Come: this brief intrusion halt,
    Russian Hill resuming
Unobtrusive ways and quaint.
Let Macondray's painters paint.

THREE FINGER JACK

Jack Peterson has put to sea.
We'll never greet him more,
Nor miss him less, though thirstiness
Forgets no swinging door.
He's out upon the ebb-tide,
Where many's gone before.

It's different now, in Steuart Street.
We miss, in bottles brown,
That hearty sense o' consequence,
And freedom of the town.
They've burned his very signboard,
And pulled his tavern down.

Ahoy, ahoy, Jack Peterson!
The tide, however slack,
That swept you free and far to sea,
Shall never fetch you back.
Yet where shall mate drop anchor?
Ahoy, Three Finger Jack!

THE TIVOLI

The Tivoli! How ghosts suffuse
That temple to ejected muse!

'Twas there that Martha sobbed and sighed
In braver times; that Mimi died,

That Carmen strutted vengeful, gay,
And Violetta pined away,

In days congenial, nights replete
With melody in Eddy street.

'Twas there, though opera surged below,
In Lovers' Lane occurred the show;

That tables scraped, and half the town
Upon the other half looked down;

That souls of dual taste could hear
Their Tetrazzini with their beer,

Their ears regale, their lips assuage,
Nor miss a movement of the stage,

Such stage as now lies darkened, dumb
Beneath its gilt proscenium.

Who now shall sketch, or quite appraise,
That Tivoli of other days?

Yet when the City once faced grim
The cinders of an interim,

It seemed as if could break her heart
Unless the Tivoli would start.

It seemed: but when above such woes
A Tivoli anew arose,

The mirth seemed sparkless, chill the song.
The torch had flickered out too long.

But ah, for one more joyous strain
That used to burst in Anna Lane,—

One fragment of the glad encores
That used to batter through the doors,—

The scenes, the lights, the girls, the beer,
The old traditions blessed, queer,

The memories fragrant, echoes sweet
Of vanished nights in Eddy Street!

WHEN SALLY DANCED

When Sally danced, and dance she could,
The rare old Bella Union stood.
Oh, well this town was circumstanced,
When Sally danced.

When Sally danced, a frail soubrette
Was Kearny Street, and frailer yet
Became, if further one perchanced
Than Sally danced.

When Sally danced, the near-by Coast
Its man for breakfast served, by boast.
Oh, gay Montmartre was out-romanced,
When Sally danced.

There Billy Dwyer and Happy Jack
Encompassed ends by faro stack
To tinkling banjos, twinkling feet
In Jackson Street.

Ah, what a bosom pair they were!
Bland Happy, trousers lavender,
Impeccable of creamy spat
And silk of hat;

And Billy, though no looking-glass,
The Damon of his Pythias.
'Twas yonder Billy ebbed his life
On Happy's knife;

And yonder Cowboy Maggie wrought
One man to death, another shot—
Some faint-of-heart procrastinator
She wedded later.

When Sally danced, the Quarter knew
Its What Cheer House, its Avenue;
Though haunts have changed, events have chanced,
Since Sally danced.

Oh where, relict of other ages,
Roll now those brilliant equipages,
Blocking doors, before the Fire,
For Bottle Meyer?

Then chance had picked and art arrayed,
And Comstock riches freshly made
Of Kearny Street a Roman path
To Zeile's bath.

Within a Bush Street theater
Belasco, Warfield call-boys were;
And Booth, McCullough, Barrett, Kean
Were nightly seen.

When Sally danced, the place to go
Tortoni's was, before the show;
And afterwards, the demi-monde
Assailed Marchand.

Ah, Sally! Though another aeon
Prevails in fields terpsichorean
And far indeed we have advanced
Since thus you danced,

Yet when was dancer ever gayer
Than Bella Union's Sally Thayer?
Or who, of modern days, might cope
With Ida Siddons skipping rope?
Or who, for elemental fun,
With merry Fanny Garretson?
Though like Lot's wife we've Sodom fled
Yet backward glanced,
Pray, have we then so profited
Since Sally danced?
Since Sally danced, erotic maid,
And Lotta played?

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"Yet the sunset still her gold
Flings at it down Geary."

LOTTA'S FOUNTAIN

Lotta! Lapse of years withal,
How your star theatrical
Sparkled once with ardor;
How your dozenth curtain call
But provoked the harder!
Yesterday they loved you well,
Marchioness or Little Nell!
Yesterday, indeed; but who
Bothers now to think of you?

Once you, Lotta, girlish, fair,
Caught their flowers, protesting,
Blowing kisses to the air;
And, attesting such affair,
Earnestly yet jesting
Placed you fount where Kearny meets
Market, Third, and Geary Streets.

Years how fateful, fogs how cold,
Round that fountain since have rolled,—
Summers waned a-weary,
Since its shaft turned mossy, old!
Yet the sunset still her gold
Flings at it down Geary;
New Year still, with romping feet,
Dances past up Market Street;
Round by round, Homeric fights,
Bulletined election nights,
Wars and harbingers of wars,
Christmas Eves beneath the stars,
Carnival and traffic, all
Round have swung centripetal.

One day, then, a little old
Lady from a journey
Murmured: "pardon, sir; 'tis bold,
But the city's changed, I'm told."
So I pointed out to her
Where the Baldwin Theater
And her vanished landmarks were.
Then she sighed, and asked: "And where
Market crosses Kearny,
Stands by chance a fountain there?"

Stands a fountain? Rather, say,
Stands Goat Island or the Bay,
Chinatown or Mission!
So I tutored her straightway
In the town's tradition.
Then she smiled, and whispered low:
"I am Lotta Crabtree." Though,
How was anyone to know?

THE FARALLONE ISLES

I've seen the sun, in boiling red,
Go down beyond the Fort,
And light those isles, whose distant sails
Seem galleys, of a sort,
Forever sailing, ever fixed—
Those ships that missed the port.

I've watched the crest of Tamalpais,
Against the sunset, throw
Her tawny hills in shadow, and
Her pines turn black below;
While, standing out to sea, those sails
Dripped silver in the glow.

I've waited till the stars came out,
And from a distant dune
Beheld a path of tossing light
Upon the water strewn.
And ever stood those galleons
Across the broken moon.

Perhaps, from some dim yesteryear,
A proper wind shall play,
A proper helmsman snatch the wheel
While yet's a course to lay,
And ships that missed the port shall come
To anchor in the Bay.

PICTURE BRIDES

Cherry petals from Japan,
Brides from windward flocking,
Each as pretty as a fan,
And as madly mocking,
Far, now far from Fuji San
Is your steamer docking.

Each on pilgrimage of love,
Wondering, elated,—
Each the wedded helpmeet of
Bridegroom picture-mated,
Peeps, a dainty treasure trove,
For the husband fated.

Fragile bits of cloisonné,
Vases quaint, exquisite,
Banzai! Tarry here a day
On a maiden visit.
Nay, the husbands urge? Then say
Which, oh which one is it?

Now the husbands brisk appear
Up the plank unruffled.
Ah, the meetings that endear,
Greetings shy and muffled!
Ah, if husbands at the pier
Got the pictures shuffled!

ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"Quarter of the called-afar,
You the magic carpet are."

THE MAGIC CARPET

Once, they say, in dim Bagdad,
Caliph magic carpet had,
Bearing riders, land or sea,
Far from Araby.

Though is here no caliphate,
Tongues as intricate await:
Haunts eccentric, jaunts profound,
Half the world around.

Come tonight; and be to Spain
Ferried swift and back again,
Contemplating, as we will,
Manners in Seville.

Here indeed will gleam bazaars,
Loiter lovers, thrum guitars,
While duennas take the breeze
From their balconies;—

Come: for half an hour or so
Dine in France; a vintage know
Worthy of the sun that spills
Down her Lorraine hills,

Till, as silver night appears,
Lorn Venitian gondoliers
Lift "Lucia", though a oar
Drips the moon no more.

Or, should westward moon grow wan,
Saunter shall we to Milan,
Drinking, where true lover sits,
Opera at two bits;

Though, in near cathedral, glow
Candles of old Mexico;
Through, from neighbor window, rise
Tyrol melodies.

Coral coast or sunset isle,
Sounds are swift and scents beguile,
Till the fire-mist hovers o'er
Mauna Loa's shore;

Till, indeed, the shades refute,
Broadway's thousand tongues grow mute,
Snuffed her lanterns, dark her steeps,
And the North Beach sleeps.

Quarter of the called-afar,
You the magic carpet are.
Quainter, caliph never had,
Back in dim Bagdad.

THE LEGEND OF TAMALPAIS

(Tamalpais, the mountain which rises above San Francisco Bay, presents to the cities below the silhouette of a sleeping maid.)

Maid of the silent hills, the sea turns gray.
Up from the eastern rim the torch of dawn
Kindles the clouds, and lights the lapping Bay.
Out of a wind-brushed sky the stars are gone;
Down the long glens the tints of morning creep.
Still in a waking world you slumber on,
Careless of day, in dreams long ages deep.
Maid of the hills, what ancient legend bids you sleep?

Flocks lay dead on the hillside,
Forests were brown and dry,
And the sun beat over, relentless,
Fixed in a copper sky.
"O warrior chief of the Tamals,
Yield—we are sore afraid!"
"Not till the hills are melted
Will I yield up the mountain maid!"

"Yield to the wrathful sun-god!"
"Not till the sea runs dry!"
"But our flocks from the snows of Shasta
Lie dead to Tehachapi."
"Fit my canoe then for battle,
Fetch then my arms to me!"
Alone on the Bay he ventured,
And struck for the open sea.

Far to the West he paddled,
Near the circling edge of the world,

Where rocks still jut from the ocean
'Tis said that he grasped and hurled,
Weary and long raged the battle,—
Shoreward then rose a cry,
For blood ran the heavens from Shasta
To burning Tehachapi.

Into the blistering ocean,
Over the blistering rim,
Vanished the sun; and the warrior,
Harried and followed him.
"O warrior chief of the Tamals,
Hailing, we wait for thee!"
But the maiden knelt on her hill-crest,
And strained to the open sea.

Dark grew the lapping waters,
Strangely the hills turned gray.
Night first came to the Tamals;
Vast was their new dismay.
"Lo, he has slain the sun-god;
Where will a torch now burn?"
"Lo, he is lost on the waters,
My love, and he'll ne'er return!"

So on the hill they found her,
Though in twilight the sea lay blurred;
And they spoke, and gently they shook her,
But she answered never a word.

Then under the stars' first gleaming,
With her face still turned to the West,
Alone on the darkening mountain,
They laid her away to rest.

Over the edge of the ocean
Slipped the lost warrior then,
And a strange orb, rising and setting,
Trailed her new light over men.
Stars came and went from the heavens,
Glittering, one by one,
When lo, from an East resplendent,
Arose the resurgent sun.

They say Mother Nature, weeping,
Shed over the sad land rain,
That brooks to the sea fell splashing,
And forests turned green again;
That thus burn the hills in summer,
That so weep the winter skies,
Though the Tamals long have departed
For forests of Paradise.

Yet, when the evening shadows
Long in the canyons lie,
When, over waiting waters,
Red is the western sky,
When, under closing twilight,
Red are the hills, and fade,
'Tis but the sun-god, dying,
Kissing the sleeping maid.

So she will lie in slumber,
Turned to the darkening West,
Veiled by the mists at evening,
Soft by the night caressed,
Cooled by the winds in summer,
Lashed by the winter's rain,
Till her lover, lost on the ocean,
Comes from the West again.

Maid of the mountain, sleep. The shadows fall,
Now is your age-long whispered story told.
Over your head the circling night-birds call.
Dark turn the canyon pines. The sea grows cold;
In from the open West soft mists, unrolled,
Down the long yellow hills of evening creep,
Veiling your form in purple, as of old.
Lights prick the valley. Canyon glens grow deep.
Night is at hand, and silence. Maid of the mountain, sleep.

GRANT AVENUE

Fog: and skies yet duller,
Wind: and rains descend—
Here engenders color,
Here the rainbows end.
Sun: and breezes vagrant,
Seeking boughs of spring,
Stir a bud as fragrant—
Fashion's opening.

Morn: milady fingers
Modes to break the heart.
Noon: and still she lingers
By the flower mart.
Night: milady, dancing
Magic hours away,
Wears the things entrancing
That she bought today.

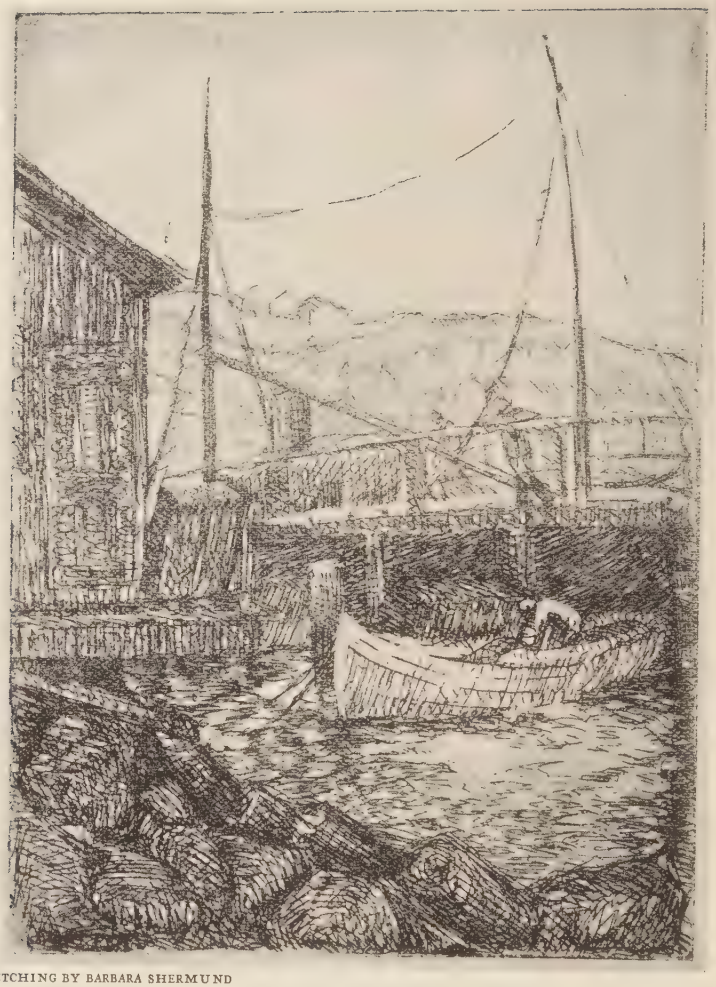
Vale of lovely women,
Haunt of hearts-at-sleeve,
Here, by every omen,
Shall the gods retrieve;
Here, though world the darkling
Wine glass push aside,
Shall a bead leap sparkling,
Shall a bloom abide.

THE TRADE WIND

In from the West, with open breast,
Aeola danced one day;
Laughing her lips, and her color high,
Laughing her eyes, and gray;
Free on the air as her floating hair
Fluttered a wraith of gown;
Aeola danced through the Gate one day—
Lo, and the fog shut down.

Lo, and the fog shut wide and thick;
Gone were the island heights;
Blaspheming craft through the murk slid past;
Glimmered the riding-lights;
Gone were the hills, and the city's streets
Groped in uncertainty,
Swallowing gloom with the salt perfume
Spumed by the hale old sea.

Aeola laughed at each bumping craft
Blundering on the tide;
Laughed at the awnings that sagged and dripped,
Laughed at the lights inside;
Laughed, and in access of modesty
Gathered her veils about—
Lo, then those ships at the bar stood home,
Ships for the sea stood out.



ETCHING BY BARBARA SHERMUND

"And then to frets Sicilian
And gamuts Genoese
I'd strum."

BARBARY COAST

I wandered into a dive one night.
Though tarnished the front façade,
A welcome struggled still bravely bright,
And still a piano played.
And one came over with beard as white
As foam on a stein, who said:

"Where are the folks tonight, Stranger? Things
Seem rather quiet here."
Gone where the uttermost welkin rings,
Gone with the yesteryear!

"Where is that den of the old North Beach,
Kippered in ale and smoke,
Where Jack the Ripper, with horrid screech,
Nightly the dead awoke?
Wine flowed as water; the waiters each
Carried a wagon spoke.

"What has become of the sights of yore,
The singers of yesterday?"
Gone with the wings of a last encore,
Gone as a flung bouquet!

"Where are the cronies I used to meet,
Rallied from near and far,
Swapping the tales of the whaling fleet
Snug at the Bowhead Bar?
Answer me, Stranger, I'll fair entreat:
Tell where my shipmates are!"

Where are the winds of the vast uncruised,
The lights of the unseen beach?
Where are the Bay's blue tides, that used
Once to Montgomery reach?

Then he observed, though his beard was white,
Past his allotted span,
"Sailor or cowpuncher, set me right:
Preacher or mining man,
What of that queen of Egyptian night,
What of the glad can-can?

"Where are the lasses I used to know,
The dollar-a-bottle beer?"
Gone with the ghosts of the long ago,
Gone with the last frontier.

MASON STREET

Spangles flashing, slippers twinkling,
Round and round she goes,
To the mad piano's tinkling,
On her tippy-toes.
Waiter! Has the girl no inkling
Of the word repose?

Flagellate 'em! Fast, Professor,
Beat the ivories hard!
Never pace a minute lesser,
While the night is starred.
Waiter! Who's the giddy dresser
Glancing hitherward?

Cheek allures and lips abet it.
Mistress with the eyes,
Speak then: do we pirouette it
Where the sachet flies?
Ah, the prospect dazzles? Let it!
Evening star, arise!

Psyche's nearest rival, spritely
Condiment of art,
Hug, oh hug me not so tightly.
Let me breathe, dear heart.
Less inured am I to nightly
Passion a la carte.

Listen, Circe's little sister,
Once embraced, endeared;
You have scorched my soul; I blister,
Even as I feared.
Waiter! Chasers two! I kissed her,
And it tasted weird.

Pound the box, Professor! Shocking
Though the modern Eve,
And a lady's lost her stocking,
I decline to leave.
What, the hour so soon for locking?
Halts all make-believe?

Gently, waiter. Friend, confessor,
Where's the sidewalk, please?
Hail, the honest milkman! Yessir,
Morning air agrees.
Man! but couldn't that professor
Castigate those keys?

THE LAST NIGHT

I think the gods, who fumbling seek
This footstool to arrange,
Might well have left to genial time
The rare old Bank Exchange.

I think the winds that seek the Bay,
The very tide that slips,
Will miss its cheer, and sadness cleave
A world of ancient ships;

That ghosts of early mariners
And past financial kings
Must throng the pearly bar to wail
This mortal turn of things,

This mortal change that cracked the cup,
That thrust the guests to rout,
That spilled for aye the pisco punch,
And closed old Duncan out.

Since Sixty-Six; since rolled the Bay
To youthful Sansome Street,
Had Duncan Nichol kept his place
Impeccably discreet.

Yet came a night, as night must come,
When from the looking-glass
Those ghosts of mariners stared down
On what had come to pass;

When Prohibition fluttered close,
And midnight nearly struck,
And white-haired Duncan Nichol raised
His final glass for luck.

"To auld lang syne!" With trembling lip
He staunchly raised the cup.
"For aye, to auld lang syne!" we cried,
And made it bottoms up.

Then half a century closed its page,
As sounded twelve o'clock.
"All out!" Old Duncan's rusty key
Turned stiffly in the lock.

He turned a key ne'er turned before.
And we, beholding, knew
That what had been was done and been,
And what was through was through.

IN PASSING

I've stood at dusk on a flotsam shore,
And dreamed of a voyage far
To world-end ports where the world begins,
And the palms and pagodas are;
To ports of copra and sandalwood,
Of lacquers and teaks and myrrh,—
Till the wide waves as a muezzin droned,
Calling a worshipper.
"Go," said the city, harkening.
"Far shall you sail, and free,
Clear to the world's-end ports; and then
You shall come back to me."

I've dreamed of hills where the stars burn close,
Of hills that concede no change,
But still bid men, to be men, ride hard
Over the cattle range;
Of canyons that plunge into chaparral,
Ever to higher climb;
And I've dreamed of a valley that God hand-paints,
Even at blossom-time.
"Nay," said the city, faltering,
"Rest in these arms, nor spurn.
Other than mine is the wine out there,
And you will not return."

THE LIGHTS

I watched the city, pricked in light,
Go tumbling, climbing, hill on hill,
And heard her murmured dissonance.
Then all grew still.

I watched the navigation lights,
The port and starboard red and green
Draw far and dim, and water foam
And wash between.

I saw the friendly Ferry clock
Grow faint and small, and Alcatraz
Her swinging lantern seaward toss
To ships that pass.

Until that shore a thing remote
Became, a dim Arabian Nights
That some Sheherazade had told,
I watched the lights.